

Performing the Great Orbital Run

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Abstract

'The Great Orbital Ultra Run' was a solitary run and performance artwork that took place over nine consecutive days around the inside of the M25 London Orbital motorway. Conceived as a 'point-to-point' run from and to ten different Motel stops along the route, this journey did not follow preconceived 'paths' but was about negotiating a route round come what may.

The journey was mapped through a continuous stream of images that were relayed live from my mobile phone along with my GPS coordinates. This was projected as a moving image artwork with sound at the Stephen Lawrence Gallery, University of Greenwich, in London, as part of the two-person exhibition, 'Evil Sport and Ultra Run'.

This paper considers the performative nature of this activity, raising the issue of where the work itself takes place in the differing notions of performance that could be said to be taking place, which occur in the live performance of the actual run, in the performance of the technology in the live mediation of digital images and in the representation of the activity as a documentation of the event. In doing so it challenges traditional assumptions regarding live performance that relies on the presence of an audience at an 'original' event and that suggests it cannot be recorded. In an age of digital 'connectedness', this paper calls for a wider understanding of the notion of performance through the live act and re-presentation of its mediated documentation.

Keywords: Performance Art, Liveness, Documentation, Mediation, Running, London Orbital.

Introduction

At approximately 10am on Monday the 5th March 2012, an artist sets off alone on foot from the Premier Inn motel, Thurrock, at Junction 31 of the M25 London Orbital, just north of the River Thames. It is the first day and first stage of a planned nine-day journey, the objective of which is for her to make her way round the inside boundary of the London Orbital, not walking, but running.

The route has been planned in advance inasmuch as 10 identified motels close to the edge of the motorway route have been booked on consecutive nights to accommodate the artist on her route. The artist therefore knows that she must make her way each day from one specified motel to another, with each motel acting as a defined start and end point to a particular stage of the route to be run and completed each day.

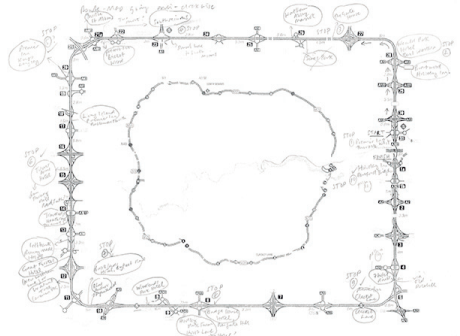


Image 1: Route Map from sketchbook © Véronique Chance

These will act as 'pit-stops' for resting and refueling overnight between each run. Otherwise the route is unplanned, except for some pre-printed sheets downloaded from 'google maps' identifying junctions ahead and other potential hazards or difficulties that will have to be negotiated along the route, come what may. With no planned route as such, the senses of negotiation and of the unknown are very much at the heart of this project and are what have driven the artist to undertake this journey as an artwork and performance.

Performance Part 1: The Live Run

Moving anti-clockwise the artist begins her journey following the direction and sound of the traffic, with the intention of keeping as close to the edge of the boundary as she can. She is dressed from head to foot in light but durable clothing that will not only protect her as much as possible from all weathers, but will also enable her to move through the variations in landscape and terrain she will encounter on her route. She knows full well that as well as running on undefined territory, she will also have to climb, jump and squeeze herself through different and varied spaces to make her own route or path through. A small rucksack on her back holds just enough for one change of clothing, a small notebook computer, spare batteries and chargers, a flask of high glucose fluid, some powder sachets and some energy bars, enough to last her the 9 days of the journey.

Strapped to her head and body are a number of media devices that are not only recording the activity, as she runs, but are also sending data to an Internet database in the form of a photographic image and a GPS coordinate approximately, every 30 seconds. Both the images and the GPS location are visible through a web Interface that is being projected onto a pre-installed pieced together Ordnance Survey map and tracing of the route, filling one of the walls of the Stephen Lawrence Gallery at the University of Greenwich, the location of the exhibition of which this work is a part.



Image 2: Still from Web-interface © Véronique Chance

This enables any visitors to not only track the artist's progress in real time as she runs (through the projection of a moving strong black line that indicates her position on the route), but also to catch glimpses of her location and viewpoint through a continuous sequence of pulsating images that also appear as a projection onto the map. This moves on every 20 images with the addition of a new image onto the end of the sequence as it is streamed through from the artist's camera-phone to the projected interface. The sound of the artist's breath and running footsteps can be heard through speakers installed at each side of the map, with the sound indicating both the running activity and its location. As long as the technology does not break down, this will continue to show the artist's progress until she completes the run. This project is therefore not only a test of the artist's physical and mental capacities in performing and completing task of the run away from an audience that she cannot herself see, but also that of the technology in relaying the activity at the same time to another space and audience located some distance away. With no other direct means of communication, the artist has to trust that the technology will perform and do its job. The audience, presuming there is one, also has to trust that what it is seeing in the gallery is really taking place at the same time in another location further away. This pattern continues for the 9 days of the run. Although the artist is not physically present in the gallery space, her presence is activated and indicated through the live mediation of images and the slow delineation of a route being marked out on a map as she runs.

Once the run is completed, an 'archived' version of the images and GPS tracking 'replays' the whole journey as a moving-image projection from its Internet storage place in real-time until the end of the exhibition. Two glass cabinets are added to the left of the large map, displaying items of clothing and other ephemera as relics from the recent running activity and as 'proof' that it has taken place. The sound from the artist's footsteps and breath continue to permeate the gallery space. The artist is not present in person.

Performance Part 2: Performance replay x 3

It seems apt to talk about this work in terms of its performance, since due to its nature and location (both in terms of the external space in which the actual activity takes place and the space and timing of its exhibition)

this is planned through different incarnations, each of which are adjusted to accommodate different stages in the development of the work; prior, during and post a planned performance event (the performance being the task-based undertaking by the artist of a durational activity in the form of a long distance run). As such it sets up a series of encounters with the work in which the audience is invited to engage with the event in different ways and to consider the artist's undertaking of it as a performance at every level. Despite this however, the audience's experience of it during the period of the exhibition is not always strictly as a performance as such. This begs the question of at what point then can the work be considered a performance?

The first experience of the work by an audience is at the exhibition Private View. As a launch event prior to the start of a proposed performance activity it is not intended at that point as a performance, but as a marker of an activity that is due to take place subsequently. Whatever is exhibited at this point in the form of an enlarged map and drawing with written annotations, serve only as information about the proposed activity but it is not the activity itself being performed. That this is not yet a performance is straightforward and clear. In this sense, it might be termed a 'pre-performance'.¹



Image 3: Map/drawing, pre-run 250cms x 250cms © Véronique Chance

The second experience of the work by an audience is at the time during which the performance as an activity is happening. However, it is not set up as a live performance in the conventional sense, in that at no time during the nine days over which the performance takes place is there an audience physically present in the same space and place as the artist, directly watching her perform the activity she has undertaken. Or rather, since the performance consists of a durational run in a specified outdoor location, there is no-one out there on the fringes of the M25 motorway, watching her run, at least not intentionally as an audience. Furthermore,

the audience's only experience of the work as a performance is through the projected live stream of images and the GPS tracking line that the artist herself is sending from her mobile phone as she is running, that serve as an indicator on a map in the gallery of her progress and presence in another space, not through an image of the artist herself actually running. Although both images and GPS tracking line are relayed live (that is, they are sent, received and updated in real-time) at the time during which the artist is undertaking the task, they rely on the faith of the audience that the activity is actually taking place there and then at the same time. They also rely on the faith of the audience that the artist is undertaking the task at all. A performance is clearly taking place through the undertaking by an artist of a durational physical task, but if the only way the audience can experience the performance is through a series of images relayed by the artist of her location and whereabouts, not of the performance itself, whether live or not, can it in this sense still be called a performance? A performance is clearly taking place through the undertaking of a durational physical activity, but if that activity also includes the activation and performance of technology worn by the artist in the live relay of a series of images to an audience so it can experience the event as it takes place, it is worth considering this as a performance.



Image 4: Detail of projection with GPS tracking line | © Véronique Chance

The third experience of the work by an audience following the completion of the task, shows both images and tracking line being reshown as a moving image projection. It is replayed from its Internet database storage in real-time² in exactly the same order and using exactly the same interface as it was when the run itself was taking place, the only difference being that the images in the sequence continue to progress through the night, whereas during the time when the performance was actually taking place, the progression of the sequence remained static or in suspension, once the artist had stopped running for the day and was resting overnight, only to begin again when she continued the following day. As an archived 'replay' following the completion of the performance activity it is in the truest sense of the word, a documentation of it. However, in terms of the audience's encounter with the work, there is little difference between this and how the

work was originally experienced as a live performance. Although the work is being experienced once the activity is over, what the audience 'sees' is the same rhythmic progression of images and GPS tracking line being projected onto the same map installed in the same gallery. The sound relayed throughout the gallery of the artist's footfall and breathing remains the same as before. The only indication that the activity has already taken place is the addition into the exhibition space of two glass cabinets, displaying items of muddled, torn clothing and other ephemera presumed to have been 'worn' by the artist whilst performing the run.



Image 5: Exhibition view, post run | © Véronique Chance

It might be accepted that the work is a performance through its previous incarnation in the action of the artist relaying images to an audience at the time during which she is performing the run, but is it still a performance after the event in the replay of the activity to an audience through its archived images, even if the experience of this by the audience barely differs?

Performance Part 3: Critical Reflections

The oppositions between the values of live performance over its documentation are well-rehearsed and have long dogged the histories of performance art practices, yet they continue to be a bone of contention as to what constitutes the authenticity of a performance. The increasing inclusion of technology into the live performance event further complicates these relationships in that what initially appeared to separate what is live and what is recorded in the experience of a performance by an audience as it is taking place and the experience of a performance after the event has occurred has become increasingly blurred. Although this is nothing new, it increasingly challenges what is meant by the term performance and more specifically what is meant by the concept of 'liveness', a term upon which the notion of performance and our understanding of it had previously relied. It is worth briefly examining these as a means of considering how they may be challenged and reconfigured towards a wider consideration of what is performance in the way in which we experience it now.

The proposition developed here is that in our subjective engagements in today's 'mediatized'

environment, a reconsideration of performance through documentation in 'live' recording and representation, offers new insights into the nature of liveness. It also enlarges on previous observations on the nature of presence in attributing the notion of presence to real-time recording and representation, shifting subjectivities and representations of the body and reconfiguring the notion of presence to new dimensions.

Arguments regarding the value of live performance are traditionally predicated on the audience's experience of the performance as a live event and the ontological dynamics incurred in the relationship between artist and audience, both of whom should be present at the same time and in the same place in which the performance is occurring. Fundamental to this is the understanding that the performance is something that can occur only once and as such it cannot and should not be repeated. The experience of value therefore lies in the fact the performance disappears after the event and as such it should not be 'saved'. If it is, "it becomes something other than performance" (Phelan 1993, 146). This view, consistently upheld by Peggy Phelan, maintains the argument for the ontology of live performance through its status as an "undocumentable event" and in the "experience of subjectivity itself" (Phelan 1993, 148). These are emphasized in the political dynamics of experiencing live performance through the visible and physical "presence of living bodies" and their subsequent disappearance (or 'invisibility') once the performance is over. Phelan stresses in the "realm of invisibility",

the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward.
(Phelan 1993, 149).

Phelan therefore, raises important political and ethical concerns regarding the function of documentation and reproduction in relation to the experiential (and first hand, ontological) event of live performance.

Arguments against this position, such as those made by Amelia Jones, seek a wider understanding of the term performance in the affirmation of a dimension that extends the concept of performance to encompass work that "may or may not have initially taken place in front of an audience" but rather takes place through the

enactment of the artist's body...that is then documented such that it can be experienced subsequently through photography, video or text.
(Jones 1998, 13).

Whilst this is not considered to be the same as the 'original' performance that has previously taken place, it asks what the performative dimension of documentation as a supplement to a performance can be. In doing so it suggests that the audience can have an experience of value that is different, but does not deter from the conception of the original performance.

This view is informed by Jones' early experience as a student of art history of only being able to inform herself of the emergent histories of performance art practices "entirely through [their] documentation" (Jones 1998, 11). She outlines in the term 'performed subjectivity' the

ontological dynamics of live and recorded performance, in relation to the emergence of Body Art practices of the 1960s and 1970s.³ The conception of the term Body Art is particularly important in this configuration in stressing "the profound shift in conceptions of subjectivity", that emerged during this period and is important in articulating the notion of a 'transfigured subjectivity' that is specifically identified in the relationship of the performing body/subject to documentation. That is, viewed through the "multiplicitous existence, enactment and re-presentation" of the works themselves, as 'documentary traces.' Having direct physical contact, argues Jones,

does not ensure knowledge [of the artist's] subjectivity or intentionality any more than does looking at a film or picture of this activity (Jones 1998, 11).

but rather emphasizes the ontology of the document in the need for such engagement in order to "deliver itself [more] fully" (Jones 1998, 11). Her insistence on the need for documentation to 'supplement' the actual, physical body of the artist in live performance directly challenges the ontological priority of live performance that is still maintained by some critics and writers on performance, such as Phelan, with the notion of 'supplement' understood as an indicator of both presence and absence⁴.

This idea is developed more fully in relation to the impact of new technology in Jones' more recent book *Self Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (2006), in which she examines the ontological differences in the production and reception of a range of different artists' works that represent the enactment of the artist's body using televisual media, starting with film and video works from the 1970s to more recent works from the last decade. Here, the document serves less as proof of something that has already taken place or as a 'supplement' to an original event, than in activating an affective notion of presence through the very act of its technological mediation.⁵

This notion is emphasized more strongly by Philip Auslander, who resists placing an ontological emphasis on the document, but rather emphasizes the phenomenological (experiential / sensory), and performative potentials of its reception in the relationship between a reproduction and its audience. In his essay, *Reactivation: Performance, Mediatization and the Present Moment* (2009), he suggests that "the playback of a recorded performance should be understood as a performance in itself" (Auslander 2009, 81), regardless of its original status, that is, as a performance that "unfolds at the time and in the place" in which it is experienced in its status as a recording or as documentation (Auslander 2009, 85).

Whilst Auslander's explorations are more concerned with the notion of reproduction in the playback of a recorded performance in relation to recorded music, they are useful here in that they assign a notion of performativity to the document through its received status by an audience as a recording, ascribing to it a sense of liveness through affective experience. It is

not suggested that this is the same as experiencing the performance “in its original circumstances” or “in the same time and place that it occurred” (Auslander 2009, 83), but it suggests a different kind of performance through the restaging or ‘reactivation’ of the original event that the audience can experience “in the here and now” (Auslander 2009, 84). In this case, the experience of value lies in the authenticity of the performance document less “as an indexical access point to a past event” (Auslander 2006, 9), than its received (or reactivated) status and renewed status and re-performance ‘in the present’, as documentation.

Auslander takes his notion of ‘reactivation’ from Walter Benjamin’s conception in his ‘Work of Art’ essay, in which the latter suggests that technical reproduction “can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself”, thus allowing the original in the form a reproduction to “meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation” and for the original to in this way, to be ‘reactivated’ (Benjamin, 1936). Different from the notion of the document as a supplement that serves as an extension of the original event, or from its formulation as a ‘substitute for the original’, the document as a reactivation acts as a ‘conduit’ or channel for the ‘beholder’ to ‘receive’ the original performance at whatever time and in whatever space he or she may be (Auslander 2009, 84). Although still bound to an ‘original’ event, the document as a ‘reactivation’ becomes an event experienced in and of itself and is particular to the time and place in which it is happening as a recording there and then, in the present moment.

More pertinent perhaps to current concerns is an argument also made by Auslander that shifts more forcefully towards an understanding of the status of performance as documentation in the absence of the existence of an original event. He opens the essay *The Performativity of Performance Documentation* (2006) with the provocative question:

what difference does it make to our understanding of an image in relation to performance documentation, that one documents a performance that [never] really happened? (Auslander 2006, 1).

Whilst this draws attention on the one hand to the current role of technology in the creation of images in the absence of an original event, it also points to the existence of a category of documentation long before developments in digital technology in which

performances were staged solely to be filmed or photographed and had no prior meaningful existence as [independent] events presented to audiences (Auslander 2006, 2).

Citing examples from Yves Klein’s famous ‘constructed’ photographic image ‘Leap into the Void’, to Cindy Sherman’s photographs of herself in various disguises, to Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster* films, Auslander claims that all these artworks record events that

never took place except in the photograph [or film] itself. With no audience or witnesses to an ‘original’ event, the space of the document becomes the space in which the performance occurs (Auslander 2006, 2).

This idea is considered further through a reconsideration of the notion of performativity, in which the term performativity is considered in the act and creation of the document itself.⁶ Pointing to an example of this in an early performance artwork by Vito Acconci, in which the work consists of the artist’s action of taking a photograph every time he blinks, “while walking a continuous line down a city street” (Auslander, 2006, 4), he raises some incisive questions about the relationship between performance and documentation. On the one hand, the work fulfills the traditional functions of performance documentation in that the photographs produced provide evidence of the work having taken place, but on the other hand, they do not serve the traditional function of the performance document in that they

do not show Acconci himself performing, but are rather photographs taken by him, whilst performing (in other words, the performance action of taking photographs is what constitutes the performance, the photographs produced as and by the performance, rather than of the performance (Auslander 2006, 4).

Traditionalists of performance have argued that a live performance “cannot be reproduced or represented”, using this to put forward an argument against documentation, but what happens if this is turned on its head, if the “the [very] act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such?” (Auslander 2006, 5).

What is significant in this suggestion is that it points to a blurring in the distinction between the document, its creation, its representation and its re-presentation). In doing so it contradicts the argument that the document necessarily depends on the existence of an original event and claims that performance documents have an independent existence as performances in themselves. Whether or not an original event actually ‘happened’, the performativity of the document in this sense suggests that it need not have happened at all. This implies that the crucial relationship is less “between a document and the performance” than “between the document and its audience.” This leaves us to ponder the question as the author does, as to whether

our sense of presence power and authenticity... derives [less] from treating the document as an ... access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly reflects an artist’s aesthetic project or sensibility for which we are the present audience (Auslander 2006, 9).

In an age in which our direct engagement with images blurs the distinction between what is live and what is recorded, it is an important consideration. This is particularly relevant in relation to how we might (re) imagine the concept of liveness and of performance

in relation to emergent 'online' technologies in which the experience of liveness

is not limited to specific performer-audience interactions [or I would add, to a specific place], but refers to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown [wherever they may be] (Auslander 2012, 6).

Conclusion

In its conception and construction, 'The Great Orbital Ultra Run' could be said to be performing the paradoxical relationships between performer, audience and document in a way that openly acknowledges the historical and current discourses surrounding live performance and technological reproduction, whilst also pointing to the continually changing effects of technology in the digital and online environments we engage with in today's networked environment.

As indicated by the artwork and in the analysis on live performance and documentation that follows it, concepts of 'live' and 'recorded', of 'physical' and 'virtual', of 'presence' and 'absence', of 'visibility' and 'invisibility', can no longer be considered polarized distinctions, but are continually shifting, fluid concepts that are continuing to develop according to the current cultural and social manifestations of technological change. As Christopher Engdahl suggests in his recent essay, "The Trans temporality of Online Performance":

"Online and increasingly mobile, technological activities such as photo and video sharing, instant messaging, blogging and social networking, organize around performance practitioners' day to day existence" (Engdahl 2016, 107)

'The Great Orbital Ultra Run' therefore sits amongst a number of performance projects that reflect an increasingly networked society within which they can be constantly mediated through a myriad of digital platforms, and which "incessantly expand temporally," thus also partaking in "cross-temporal exchanges where neither the present nor the original event is ever only itself" (Engdahl 2016, 107; Schneider, 2011).

'The Great Orbital Ultra Run' activated the present through the performance of a durational physical activity in the form of a long-distance run that unfolded over a period of nine days. In its form as an original ('live') event, taking place in a remote geographical location, it was an activity that could and would only ever be performed once by the artist and that could and would not be able to be experienced as a 'live' performance by an audience in the same physical location. The only way it could be experienced as a performance by an audience, was through its presence some distance away from the actual place/s where the event itself was unfolding, and through the performance of technological mediation that indicated that the activity was taking place. Had the technology broken down there would have been nothing to see, apart from a blank map and drawing of the location. The precariousness of the artist's body in performing the run was mirrored by the

precariousness of the technology in relaying the event.

The performer's presence was set in motion through the continual streaming of images being relayed by the artist from her mobile phone, not of herself performing the run, but of the fragmented viewpoints of the locations she was running in. With the absence of the performer's body both from the space in which the performance was being experienced by an audience and from the mediated images that indicated that the performance was happening, the concept of presence was no longer directly associated with the visibility of the artist's body and the distinction between absence and presence became increasingly blurred. The sound of the artist's footfall and breathing were the only other markers of the physical activity taking place and of corporeal presence, but as pre-recorded sounds created a disconnect with the reality of the event actually taking place.

The replay of the performance subsequent to the live event through its archived repository of digital images that are revealed through a web-interface means that the work and the performance can be re-activated and re-experienced at will, as long there is a reliable Internet connection. That it was not possible to record the work in the conventional sense due to its format and duration, and the fact that work can only be replayed or re-presented though its web-interface mean that it always retains an element of liveness. That there is little difference in the experience of the work by an audience, who experiences it now and the experience of the work when it was originally performed as a live event reflects Benjamin's notions of reactivation and by extension Auslander's understanding of reactivation as something that acts as a 'conduit' or channel for the 'beholder' to 'receive' the original performance at whatever time and in whatever space he or she may be (Auslander 2009, 84). To reiterate: although still bound to an 'original' event, the document as a 'reactivation' becomes an event experienced in and of itself and is particular to the time and place in which it is happening as a recording there and then, in the present moment.

Writing on the work of performance group Blast Theory, who combine real and virtual spaces in simultaneous live and online participatory performances, Rosemary Klich suggests that:

the dialect of presence/absence, and by association the dialectic of live/mediated, have become limited frameworks through which to articulate the complexities of mixed-reality performance. (Klich, 2007)

She argues that such works of mixed or augmented reality:

disrupt the binary founded on the perception that involves the disappearing presence of the body, while mediated representation denies presence, presenting an absence of the body (Klich, 2007)

Instead Klich offers a different vision of the relationship between the live and the virtual in a way that seeks to avoid their intrinsic opposition by insisting on the way in which such works allow the live and the virtual to be "brought into conversation in such a way

as to minimize the significance of definitive boundaries and undermine their distinction" (Klich, 2007).

Whilst 'The Great Orbital Run' does not operate on the same level of direct participation, it is a useful framework to consider and one that fully recognizes the changing world we live in⁷.



Image 6: Running Kit 1 © Véronique Chance



Image 7: Running Kit 2 © Véronique Chance

Endnotes

¹ In his essay "Time-Based History: Perspectives on Documenting Performance", Nik Wakefield points to a concept of 'pre-performance' as "a work that is being gestured toward in a present but cannot be performed presently." (Wakefield 2015, 178)

² My use of the term Real-time understood here as occurring within the same time frame or at the same time rate as the original event.

³ This is developed further in Jones' book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 1999.

⁴ This idea is taken from Jacques Derrida's articulation of the term in relation to writing, which he describes as: "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence or originary perception..." (Derrida 1976, 154). This is an important analogy in the conception of the document in relation to performance art practices because it indicates a performative dimension to the document in the interpretive (perceptive) relation between the viewing subject and the subject/object being viewed, suggesting a more embodied engagement in that dynamic.

⁵ Jones refers to the video work of Pipilotti Rist as being particularly symptomatic of this.

⁶ See J.L Austin's use of the term in relation to language and

speech from his lecture *How to do Things with Words* (1955) whereby he distinguishes between 'performative' statements whose utterance constitutes action (eg. saying I do in a marriage ceremony), from 'constative' statements, which are those that merely describe the action (Austin, 1955; Auslander 2006, 5). Auslander turns this on its head, replacing Austin's verbal statements with 'images that document performances,' suggesting 'that performance documents are not analogous to constatives but to performatives: in other words, *the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such.*' (Auslander, 2006,5).

⁷ Klich bases her analysis in relation to N. Katherine Hayles' framework of the "semiotics of Virtuality" outlined in her influential book *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, 1999. In it Hayles, investigates the fate of embodiment in an information age through a vision of a hybrid subjectivity that continuously moves "between the material realm of bodily agency and the dematerialized realm of digital information." (Klich 2007).

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